

What Kind of Combat Sport Is Sociology?¹

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Criticism is not merely a good thing; the discipline requires it to advance. Precisely because it is so important, criticism must be held to high scholarly standards. As I will show, Wacquant's review of *Sidewalk* quotes selectively and misleadingly and systematically misrepresents the work as a whole. The review is thoroughly inaccurate and unreliable.

Forty years after Jane Jacobs wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a work that represented Greenwich Village sidewalk interaction as the ideal for what makes up a "great" American city, I went back to the neighborhood and revisited Jacobs's principles. On the sidewalk, I came to know the unhoused vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers. These are people who Hakim Hasan, one of the book's key subjects, says are "hidden in public space." On the streets, I found a world filled with illegality, personal defect, and shame and also a world of mutual support, struggles for respectability, ingenuity, and resilience. A core issue of my agenda was to understand the ways in which "moral" behavior and "decency" are and are not constructed within settings seemingly unfavorable to such behavior. I also found that the sidewalk was in some ways quite different than it was when Jacobs described it, when "eyes and ears upon the street" were presumed to make sidewalk life safe and comfortable. In *Sidewalk*, I enter into a dialogue with her theories of public space under the new conditions of social inequality and cultural difference.

My method was participant observation, and I worked as a magazine scavenger and street vendor on and off during more than five years. I developed and systematically employed an *extended place method* for expanding the boundaries of the traditional neighborhood study by focusing on how institutions of various sorts—especially institutions that

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organize power—affect the microsettings I studied. I moved my fieldwork out from the sidewalk to some of the other places that had a role in making Sixth Avenue what it is. In order to understand how vending space had been cut down on the blocks, leading to space wars between vendors, for example, I did fieldwork at a business improvement district that had used its influence to cut the space. The key to this approach is the recognition that the “sidewalk” extends to Pennsylvania Station (where unhoused vendors had once lived before they were removed and migrated to Sixth Avenue), the City Council (which passed a local law legalizing the sale of table-based written-matter vending), and the business improvement districts, among many other places I looked. Throughout the course of this study, methodological issues loomed large: A 30-page methodological appendix also deals with many other issues including fact checking, appropriate uses of quotations, social position, ethnographic authority, the use of the tape recorder, linking micro and macro, disclosing names of locations and subjects, obtaining informed consent, and making interventions into the lives of subjects. The careful and systematic approach to fieldwork was of central concern to me in this project.

The fieldwork for *Sidewalk* was conducted during a period when many residents of American cities came to see their sidewalk life as a struggle. They perceived that conventional standards did not apply on streets like Sixth Avenue. Politicians responded to people working the streets by advancing programs for restoring order that seemed to be the exact opposite of Jacobs’ “eyes and ears upon the street.” Informal social control was no longer enough, perhaps because the eyes upon the street no longer looked like those of the neighborhood’s passersby. It was in this social and political context that the work of social scientists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling became highly influential. Their “broken windows” theory advocated strict enforcement of minor infractions and public disturbances, arguing that small signs of social disorder directly lead to the spread of serious crime. When Wacquant accuses me of presenting “a sprawling stockpile of data without any theory to organize it,” he somehow ignores the book’s central dialogue with the theories of both Jacobs and of Wilson and Kelling. But this misrepresentation is nothing compared to what follows.

I can now first take up the key false claim in Wacquant’s review of *Sidewalk*: that in various ways I naively fall in with my subjects, romanticizing their lives and depicting them as saints. Second, I show how consequential this misrepresentation is as he tries to argue that *Sidewalk* is an endorsement for the government’s withdrawal from activist interventions in the provisions of services. Third, I detail several additional disagreements. I conclude by showing that Wacquant contributes little to advancing urban ethnography (or ethnography more generally), which should strive to yield nuance instead of slogans.

THE SAINTLINESS OF VENDORS

Wacquant's central argument is that I turn the unhoused vendors of Greenwich Village into "saints" or "paragons of morality" (p. 1469). He says that I do so through three techniques: that I censor illegal and deviant behavior; that I skew the display and interpretation of data; and that I suggest there is [quoting Wacquant] "a patent incompatibility between worthy street entrepreneurship and unlawful pursuits" (p. 1477). All of these claims are based on misrepresentations and on selective quotation.

Censoring Illegal and Deviant Behavior

Wacquant.—"This sanitizing thrust is further solidified by Duneier's uncritical acceptance of his informants' self portraits ('I have *never* doubted *any* of the things Hakim told me about his life' (SW, p. 360; emphasis added)" (p. 1478, n. 12).

Response.—Throughout his review, Wacquant's technique is to make assertions and then back them up in footnotes with quotations from the text of *Sidewalk*. Here, by quoting only part of the statement as it appears in the book, Wacquant makes the meaning of my sentence the *opposite* of what I conveyed. Here is the full quote: "Although I have never doubted any of the things Hakim told me about his life, in conducting this study I have looked upon it as my responsibility to check salient things people tell me about themselves before reporting them . . . [Hakim] thought this reasonable . . . and agreed to request his college records as well as official employment information from the last firm he worked at. Everything checked out" (SW, p. 360). Note that not only does Wacquant omit central phrases, but also by adding italics to the words "never" and "any," which were not emphasized in the original, he creates the impression that my acceptance of accounts was uncritical when the text indicates otherwise.

Wacquant.—"This sanitizing thrust is further solidified by Duneier's . . . express desire to not make them look bad: 'I believe I should never publish something about an identifiable person which I cannot look him or her in the eye and read'" (p. 1478, n. 12).

Response.—Here again he gives my statement a meaning that is opposite the one it has when read in context, in which I explain that I read the book to my subjects including sections where they will likely feel they look bad. I wrote,

One of the most difficult aspects of reading people the sections they are in is the fear or nervousness I feel as I approach passages in the manuscript that they might interpret as negative or disrespectful. This might be one of the best arguments for making the people one writes about completely anonymous. Some observers may feel a greater license to tell the truth as they see it, even when it might be hurtful, if they never have to face the people they write about. But I have developed a rather thick skin when it comes to reading people passages they might not like. Ultimately, I believe

I should never publish anything about an identifiable person which I cannot look at him in the eye and read. (SW, p. 35)

Why did Wacquant not include the sentence above about my thick skin when reading people passages they do not like? Nor does he include any other elements of the text that would have yielded an appropriate interpretation. When read in context, my statement does not suggest that I have an uncritical desire to make my subjects look “good,” but that I sometimes must struggle with the necessity to make them look “bad,” especially when not hiding behind anonymity.

Wacquant.—“A deeper theoretical flaw . . . [is that] Duneier takes the statements of his informants at face value . . .” (p. 1480).

Response.—My frequent use of checks against accounts somehow escapes Wacquant, but other reviewers have come to a conclusion precisely the opposite of his. Kim Hopper’s review in *Social Service Review* states, “It is also an unsparing and disciplined piece of scholarship that . . . goes to great lengths to track down the claims of informants whose credibility might be suspect in the reader’s eyes—one man’s childhood memory of lynchings in South Carolina, Hakim’s corporate past, Mudrick’s much-professed devotion to his granddaughter” (Hopper 2001). Amy Waldman, a *New York Times* reporter, wrote in the *Washington Monthly*, “[Duneier] has far better fact-checking skills than most journalists and, accordingly, *Sidewalk* ranges far, and rewardingly, from Sixth Avenue” (Waldman 2000).

Not only do I have an entire section of my methodological appendix devoted to fact checking (SW, pp. 345–47), but throughout the book I make significant efforts to examine the analytic adequacy of these “facts” for explaining the behaviors of my subjects.

Wacquant.—“If [vendors] were using drugs, . . .’ writes Duneier, ‘we might reasonably conclude that they had given up on the struggle to live in accordance with society’s standards’ (SW, p. 170). This is a curious proposition since (i) Duneier provides profuse indications that sidewalk vendors are using drugs and (ii) millions of Americans of all classes and ethnic groups use illegal drugs regularly without for that matter having forsaken ‘society’s standards’” (p. 1477n).

Response.—Here Wacquant creates a different quotation by dropping 21 words from the middle of the sentence. My sentence reads, “If they were using drugs, could not work for other people in a tolerable manner, had no marketable skills, and then robbed to support their habit, we might reasonably conclude that they had given up on the struggle to live in accordance with society’s standards” (SW, p. 170). By leaving out the modifying information, Wacquant makes it appear as though I naively conclude my subjects are struggling to live in accordance with standards of moral worth while making it seem that by my own definition this is not so.²

² In the original version of Wacquant’s essay that *AJS* invited me to respond to and that he distributed widely on the Internet, he cut out the 21 words without inserting

Wacquant.—"It may well be that sidewalk vendors do take up the trade as an 'alternative to stealing' but there is no way of knowing since Duneier also systematically *censors unflattering and deviant behavior* that would contradict his contention that they are engaged in a wholesome enterprise of moral uplift of self and other" (p. 1477; his emphasis).

Response.—I devote four *whole* chapters to documenting various "deviant and unflattering behaviors," including the excessive drug use Wacquant is otherwise able to note directly above. In the introduction I write:

Yet the stories of these sidewalks cannot ultimately serve as sociological romance, celebrating how people on the streets "resist" the larger structures of society. The social order these relationships carve out of what seems to be pure chaos, powerful as its effects are, still cannot control many acts that affront the sensibilities of local residents and passersby. How can we comprehend types of behavior such as sidewalk sleeping, urinating in public, selling stolen goods, and entangling passersby in unwanted conversations? (SW, pp. 9–10)

A work that devotes four chapters to documenting these behaviors cannot justly be accused of "systematically censoring unflattering and deviant behaviors." But a great deal of the vendors' behavior is indeed not offensive. That this "decency" does exist alongside other behaviors apparently bothers Wacquant.

Wacquant.—"[Duneier] repeats time and again that street selling has a civilizing effect on all involved" (p. 1477).

Response.—Throughout the book, I insist on a more nuanced reading. There is a specificity to civility, one unevenly present, but an unevenness that can be understood in light of biographical histories, neighborhood history, situations on the block, and, most definitely, larger structures that impinge from the outside. At the beginning of a four-chapter section, "The Limits of Informal Social Control," I wrote, "Having examined the way that the informal ties of the sidewalk help men as they struggle to live in accordance with standards of moral worth, I want to look now at the very acts that lead policy makers to classify these same persons as 'broken windows.' . . . In examining some of the hardest cases and the most contradictory evidence, I hope to address the limitations of informal modes of social control" (SW, p. 159).

At the end of a chapter on sidewalk sleeping and crack bingeing, I write:

elipses where they are currently found. Although the editors of *AJS* have added the elipses, this omission is unfortunately consistent with the techniques Wacquant used throughout the review.

Informal mentoring and controls simply cannot contain all acts that go against common notions of decency, nor could we expect government to establish a policy that would do any better. The best alternative, of course, would be better drug treatment and men who are willing to avail themselves of it. But even with the best programs in place, some people will choose to binge. Some of those will choose to earn their money honestly. And some of those will sleep on the sidewalk. The contribution of the informal system of social control inherent in sidewalk life is to encourage men to live "better" lives within the framework of their own and society's weaknesses. (SW, p. 172)

Wacquant.—"That Duneier did *not* grant his informants cover of anonymity, contrary to the norm in ethnographic research, strongly reinforces the bent to exclude illegal and immoral activities from their accounts" (p. 1477–78; his emphasis).

Response.—As I explain in the book, I certainly "grant" subjects the right to remain anonymous, and two people took me up on that offer. In a section where subjects make anti-Jewish remarks, I write: "The participants, who forgot the tape was running, have asked me to conceal their identities in this instance" (SW, p. 336). In a chapter on police harassment, I concealed the identity of offending officers. But the people I wrote about mainly chose not to have their identities disguised. I granted them the right to be known as people with real names, something that many signaled they much appreciated.

I wrote in the methodological appendix: "It seems to me that to disclose the place and names of the people I have written about holds me up to a higher standard of evidence. [As many now have], scholars and journalists may speak with these people, visit the site I have studied, or replicate aspects of my study. . . . At the same time, I recognize that there are sometimes good reasons for keeping a site or a person's name anonymous" (SW, p. 348).³

Skewing the Display and Interpretation of Data

Wacquant.—"There are precious few moments of anger, jealousy, dissension, and conflict, let alone villainy, among the vendors" (p. 1478). "There is scarcely any account of physical commotion and confrontation in the book and no trace of weapons (outside of one cursory mention; SW p. 244), even for self-defense" (p. 1477).

Response.—Throughout the book, I continuously report such behaviors. Thus, Mudrick demonstrates lack of regard for others: "I don't give a fuck about nobody else. . . . Fuck the other people" (SW, p. 54); Leo engages in intimidation of other vendors (SW, p. 86); Rock gets accused by Warren of stealing his property (SW, p. 91); Mudrick and Butterroll

³ An excellent example of this for an ethnography of African vendors in New York City may be found in Stoller (2002).

seem to cheat (SW, p. 108); Johnson talks to and about women in a 'negative' way (SW, p. 210); a vendor fences stolen books (SW, pp. 218–28); Hakim and Muhammad, among others, fight over sidewalk space (SW, pp. 231–52); many vendors violate the municipal codes (SW, p. 260); some vendors give police false names and ignore answering summonses (SW, p. 261), and two vendors are quoted making anti-Semitic statements (SW, p. 237).

I devoted part of a chapter ("The Space Wars") to describing violent episodes between vendors as they fought over spots, including the use of weapons. Wacquant also does not describe the photographs of men fighting. Nevertheless, it is *not* a scene of eternal violence, despite some people's stereotypes. And I do report the peace more fully than the wars because the peace is indeed the more common state of affairs—massively more common.

Wacquant.—"Whenever a 'cultural' explanation spotlighting the morality of the street peddlers and material considerations of expediency and power suggest themselves to account for a pattern of behavior, Duneier systematically latches onto the former without examining the latter. For example, he maintains that vendors do not display pornography during the day, not because they might run into trouble with adult buyers or attract the attention of the police, but 'out of respect, they say, for passing children'" (p. 1478).

Response.—Here Wacquant once again takes my words out of context and twists the facts, since I adopt precisely the opposite explanation. Compare this paragraph about the sale of pornography with what he writes above:

The written matter vendors on the block believe that the act of "laying shit out" [laying scavenged trash on the sidewalk for sale] poses the biggest threat to their livelihood. As they see it, the police tend to crack down on all the vendors when some get out of hand by failing to put their stock on tables, as the law demands. When some men on the block endanger everyone, the "old heads" or mentors often try to exert social control, before the police come and make life difficult for everyone. Once, for example, when Butteroll and Al, his sometimes coworker, had a number of pornographic photographs laid out by the bus shelter, Ishmael called Marvin to see what was going on.

"They got porno and other stuff sitting all over the sidewalk right by the bus stop," Ishmael said. "Someone gonna call the cops and they gonna roll up in here if we don't take care of this. . . ."

. . . Although on most occasions the vendors are self-regulating, there are times when men "laying shit out" will get careless and police will appear, often enforcing the letter of the law, including the number of tables that can be on the block, and whether they are the proper distance from doorways. This provides a further incentive for the vendors to be self-regulating (SW, p. 95).

Wacquant.—"According to [Duneier], even these violations of common

standards of propriety are motivated not so much by brute constraints (such as the 'access problem to the bathroom resource itself,' discovered during a firsthand visit to the public latrines of Washington Park and verified by the testimony of a friend golfer) as by a sense of decency and 'respect for society'" (pp. 1473–74).

Response.—I do not adopt any one explanation for why some men urinate in public and some do not. I find that some men probably get accustomed to constraints, while others seek to avoid public bathrooms when they know their body odor is offensive. But to state that I privilege a "respect for society" explanation over a "brute constraint" explanation is to engage in a careless reading of the chapter. It is also noteworthy that, in trying to argue that I privilege "respect for society" over "brute constraint," Wacquant supports this view with a footnote to my text [n. 10]. But when you go to the pages he refers to, I am trying to illustrate "brute constraint": "I have also heard from Adam Winkler, a friend who plays golf at the Hillcrest Country Club, that it is not uncommon to see men urinate on the golf course, despite the restrooms scattered throughout the tract. In all socioeconomic classes, the male act of urinating in public seems to be common, *though those who work on the streets seem to have fewer options as to where to go*" (SW, p. 186; emphasis added).

Wacquant.—Commenting on my description of men harassing women passersby, Wacquant writes: "[Duneier] reassures us that, while such breaches of 'conversational ethics' . . . do 'create tension,' they 'rarely harm' and should not reflect badly on the vendors since 'at other times . . . each of these men would be seen as acting in "positive" and straightforward ways toward others, including the women in their lives' (SW, pp. 190, 210, 314)" (p. 1475).

Here Wacquant combines words from different parts of *Sidewalk*. When I state that on many other occasions these men will act in straightforward ways toward women, I *do not* do so in the context of "reassuring" the reader about the character of the people I write about. Instead, I am trying to let the reader know that the "interactional vandalism" I document is not the main mode of interaction and would not be characteristic of most scenes on the street. For this reason the vendors' behavior cannot be attributed to personal incompetence or to their subcultural memberships. When I state that these breaches "rarely harm," I do not do so to reassure my reader about the character of the vendors, but simply to explain why the interactions are anyway unsettling—not always because of physical danger or because anything offensive is being said, but because practical conversational ethics are being betrayed. It is a focused strategy, and in a way that arises out of race, class, and gender contact of a certain sort. Finally, in his quotation above, Wacquant does not indicate that in the original the word "positive" is in quotes.

Wacquant.—"As for the accusation by local bookstore owners that the sidewalk vendors steal books and sell them at a cut rate, Duneier rebuts it with a long exegesis on the organization of publishing suggesting that

the ‘sale of written matter is always a corrupt enterprise’ (SW, p. 221) and that theft is rampant in the business of bookselling. Presumably, the fact that store owners and customers filch books provides a warrant for vendors to do so also” (p. 1475).

Response.—Once again, Wacquant misrepresents evidence. Here he takes a quote from one of my subjects, and gives the impression that the words come from me. This practice is of a piece with his larger misrepresentation of the chapter.

It is normally assumed that the criminal behavior on the street is caused by a “disorderly” atmosphere, or by a unique failure of these men to regulate themselves. As I explain, rather than accept such assumptions at face value, a better analytical strategy is to compare the acts these men engage in to those of more conventional city dwellers, asking if their logic is as distinctive as it might appear. My investigation into the written-matter economy, about which Wacquant tells the reader nothing, shows that the most “organized” outlet stores and newstands are engaging in the sale of stolen materials (see SW, pp. 222–23). Indeed, in the case of stolen books, we have no better reason to believe that the instances of deviant social behavior (real or imagined) on the street are caused by an atmosphere of disorder, than to believe that these instances in the lives of the “normal” have such roots.

The “Incompatibility between Worthy Street Entrepreneurship and Unlawful Pursuits”

Wacquant suggests that *Sidewalk* argues that because the vendors occupy the realm of honest business they do not engage in unlawful pursuits.

Wacquant.—“Duneier *disconnects the legal from the illegal economy* and excludes by fiat the latter from his purview, on grounds that the topic was ‘addressed in detail by other scholars’ (SW, p. 159)” (p. 1476; his emphasis).

Response.—Compare the actual sentence and the snippet Wacquant has produced as “evidence.” My sentence states: “I might have focused, say, on the sale of marijuana or crack, *but during the time of my fieldwork such petty dealing was uncommon—only once did I see a man working with the vendors sell marijuana to a passerby*—and also has been addressed by other scholars” (SW, p. 159; emphasis added). Here I have explained that the reason I do not write in more detail about drug dealing is because I did not observe it as a regular practice among the vendors. Yet, he gives the impression that I said I do not focus upon it simply because it has been covered by other scholars. His selective quotation misleadingly suggests that I did not discuss drug selling at all. But also, he gives the impression that I “disconnect the legal from illegal economy,” whereas (as shown below) I actually focus in detail on these links.

Wacquant.—“[Duneier’s] postulate that there exists a patent incom-

patibility between worthy street entrepreneurship and unlawful pursuits is untenable and begs the very question to be investigated" (p. 1477).

Response.—I wrote a *full chapter* (SW, pp. 217–28) on fencing of stolen goods that discusses the *compatibility* of "worthy street entrepreneurship" and "unlawful pursuits." The chapter, based on painstaking investigation, describes how fencing works through some sidewalk vendors who are otherwise engaged in legal entrepreneurial activity. Thus, I make the opposite point: legal and illegal pursuits exist side by side, sometimes in the lives of the same vendors.

As previously noted, *Sidewalk* takes the connection between these spheres much further than Wacquant. Through investigation, I show not only that some street vendors sell stolen books, but also that book stores and newsstands (including some of the most prominent ones) also sell stolen books and periodicals (SW, pp. 222–25).

Wacquant.—"[Duneier's disconnect between the legal and illegal economy] is surprising, first, because the Village is renowned as one of the region's prime open-air markets for narcotics, a variety of which can be openly purchased on the streets, in Washington Park, and around the nearby basketball courts" (p. 1476).

Response.—Wacquant throughout writes as though he is presenting material that I did not present, when, in fact, he is simply reporting material identical to that found in *Sidewalk*. The description above could have been taken from my book, though Wacquant puts it forth as his own. I wrote:

Another element of the Village scene that does not appear in Jane Jacobs's description are the "head shops" selling drug accessories and paraphernalia and the drug dealers, who offer illegal substances as pedestrians pass by. For many years Washington Square Park was the center of such activity, but in the late nineties the New York City Police Department installed cameras throughout the park. Now the drug dealing has spilled out onto side streets near the park and, most visibly, in front of the West Fourth Street basketball courts and up and down Sixth Avenue. (SW, p. 119)

Furthermore, I do not censor the connections between vendors and the drug economy. Throughout the book, I refer to their drug use, and even relations with dealers, as in this passage: "A thirtyish black woman on a bicycle who sells crack cocaine passed by and stopped near the table. . . . Ron walked over to the lady on the bicycle, and together they made their way down the block. This was a bad sign, Marvin explained. It meant that Ron was about to go on a 'mission' to buy crack and get high" (SW, p. 55).

EVALUATING WACQUANT'S CENTRAL CHARGE: IS *SIDEWALK* AN "ENDORSEMENT" OF THE NEOLIBERAL STATE?

The selective use of material from *Sidewalk* documented above is extremely consequential for evaluating Wacquant's larger charge, that the book is "tied and party to the ongoing construction of the *neoliberal* state" (p. 1471). His argument is wrong because it is built upon the egregious misrepresentations detailed above. But it is also built upon flawed logic, internal inconsistencies, and unsupported assumptions.

Neoliberalism is a word that has gained currency to describe the belief in the free market as an end in itself. With respect to the management of the poor, neoliberalism involves a combination of the state's (1) withdrawal from activist interventions in the provision of services and (2) intensification of its repressive interventions to control the poor.

Wacquant's argument is that *Sidewalk*, *No Shame in My Game*, and *Code of the Street* each constitute an endorsement of the neoliberal agenda because, according to him, they show that "good" poor people will find a way to make out in this cruel world—selling scavenged stuff on the street, working in fast food restaurants, acting "decent"—while suggesting that others who do not do these things are good-for-nothings who can legitimately be ignored as the state cuts back on services for the poor. He interprets my argument as saying that among the poor there are (a) the "saints"—those who are moral and adopt entrepreneurial strategies of survival for which they should receive social approval—and (b) those who are undeserving of social provision and should be the object of a proper "broken windows" strategy; that is, they should be controlled.

One can see, therefore, how central the selective quotes detailed above are to his point. This key component of his argument falls apart in the light of overwhelming evidence that *Sidewalk* does *not* turn the vendors into saints: it presents them in such complexity that there is no division between "good" poor people and "bad" poor people, legal and illegal, or any such false dichotomy. Rather, the book consistently argues that within the same individuals one often finds struggles to live moral lives and tendencies that would undermine social order, and that many of the same people cycle in and out of vending, scavenging, and panhandling, drug use, alcoholism, and criminal behavior.

The implication of Wacquant's argument—that the image of vendors as saints provides fodder for the propaganda machine of the neoliberal state—rests on the assumption that these vendors in fact could *ever* be viewed by the public at large as a model for self-sufficiency among the poor. One could imagine, for example, images of former welfare recipients now working full-time jobs being used in such a way (ignoring, of course, that a majority of these women remain in poverty with inadequate access to health care or child care). But unhoused black vendors who use drugs, urinate in public, and catcall passing women? It is rather the case that these men are seen as serious impediments to the dominant coalitions of politicians and businessmen who are "progrowth" in their single-minded

pursuit of downtown development (Logan and Molotch 1987). In a chapter of *Sidewalk* that Wacquant does not mention (pp. 231–52), the book details the way that business interests co-opted the liberal political establishment (including the ACLU) to cut down on space for these outcasts. Far from receiving praise for their lack of reliance on dwindling forms of social support, these men are reviled by many of those running our cities, especially those private forces that have acquired jurisdiction over many neighborhoods through creating business improvement districts (BIDs). Wacquant fully ignores my extended discussion of the BIDs, including this conversation I describe with a vending cart manufacturer when I tried to intervene to purchase a nice stand for an unhoused vendor:

“Did you show this to the head of Business Improvement District A?” (The head of BID A was a powerful man in New York real estate who, the manufacturer asserted, was an enemy of sidewalk vending.)

“No,” I replied.

“Well, then forget about it. . . . You gonna show them this? Are you kidding? They want to get rid of these people! . . . Look, You know what started all this? Really simple. They want to get all the Niggers off the street. They told me ‘We want them off. They’re bad for business!’ You want to put them on, Mitch! Why you making so much trouble, Mitch? You’re spitting in their face with this!” (SW, p. 356)

Privatization has gone so far that BIDs have acquired the power to tax, along with their power to supervise and to monitor the poor who have dared to enter their realm. Their philosophy suggests that the formal market economy can and should cover all of social life, but that the poor must accept what jobs are offered to them rather than start their own businesses in public space. As one BID leader told me in a passage that Wacquant ignores:

Its mostly about how they look as much as what they’re doing. It’s not just that they’re selling things in public space, but they don’t look like they’ve made a capital investment in what they’re doing. They are not selling high-quality goods. When they are selling high-quality goods, there is an implication that the goods are stolen. Its not clear that they are part of the social fabric. The problem—besides that it looks disordered because of a lack of capital investment and the lack of social control imposed upon it—is that there is an element of unfairness with people who are renting stores and are selling similar merchandise and are paying taxes and minimum wage and rent. (SW, p. 234)

These vendors will never be viewed as desirable members of the neighborhood. If *Sidewalk* convinces some readers that their presence—despite many “indecencies”—is less harmful than those readers once believed, then it has served a useful function. Given the *fierce* contempt for these men’s presence on the sidewalks of New York, it is absurd to believe that

liberal politicians, capitalists, or the general public would seize upon these unhoused black vendors as that segment of the poor that could be modeled and reproduced on a scale to justify retrenchment of the welfare state.

Wacquant claims that by depicting vendors as saints, some other group will be demonized for the sake of justifying the state's withdrawal from providing services and further repressive measures. To the contrary, *Sidewalk* is hardly a book that would lead to the condemnation of any group as morally faulty. Wacquant barely discusses my chapters on panhandlers and other layabouts. The reader would never know from his review that in an effort to explicitly provide a contrast group for the entrepreneurially driven vendors, I took on an extensive study of those unhoused black men on the street who refuse to take up the option of working as scavengers and vendors. These panhandlers eke out an existence by begging, but they are not inspired to take on the activity of selling scavenged books or magazines. Why not? They explain, as described in the book, that they do not want to have to go through the trouble of picking through trash, lugging tables and goods to the street, maintaining a space, staying at the table for hours, and dismantling the whole enterprise every evening. Others of these panhandlers are so dominated by their excessive drug use that they cannot maintain such a structured life.

Panhandlers are the very archetype of the "undeserving poor," holding the doors open at ATM machines and begging, sometimes aggressively, on street corners and at subway entrances. They are the one group of "street people" most aggravating to New Yorkers of whatever political stripe. In the words of the New York City Council's legislative finding, the "increase in aggressive solicitation throughout the city has become extremely disturbing and disruptive to residents and businesses, and has contributed not only to the loss of access to and enjoyment of public places, but also to an enhanced sense of fear, intimidation, and disorder" (NYC Council, 1996, as cited in Duneier and Molotch 1999). Indeed, *Sidewalk* demonstrates countless incidents of "interactional vandalism," (see also Duneier and Molotch 1999) or patterns of interaction that violate the norms and etiquette of everyday conversation. And yet, my portrait of them is radically different than negative folk understandings that would be used to justify punitive measures. While demonstrating that some of them engage in serious abuses of public space, I also show that their activities are a kind of structured work, even an entrepreneurial activity. The point is that even on the street there are different levels of ambition and initiative, as well as personal preferences, among those striving to survive. Far from even inadvertently teaching a lesson that any group is lacking in moral standing and is therefore ripe for repressive measures or cuts in social provision, *Sidewalk* presents some of the most troublesome cases as individuals variably responding to the pressures of their worlds, with some coping better than others and also varying from day to day

in preserving a moral outlook.⁴ There can be no sharp distinction between a “worthy” and an “unworthy” poor when we see the complexity of these men’s lives.

Wacquant then moves from his absurd notion of *Sidewalk*’s distinction between worthy and unworthy poor to a contrived argument about how *Sidewalk* seeks to deal with it. Here he argues that the book lays the ideological groundwork for a cleansing of the streets of the moral losers among the poor. In a breathtaking passage, he writes, “*Sidewalk* supplies a blueprint for a refocused, more efficient, class cleansing of the street that would stringently enforce the norm of ‘personal responsibility’ but accord the worthy poor the room necessary to administer for themselves a sort of workfare program or ‘moral boot camp’ composed of begging, scrounging, and recycling secondhand merchandise” (p. 1485). To support his view, he cites a passage in *Sidewalk* which states: “A better approach would be to define disorder with greater accuracy. In particular, I would like to see ‘broken windows’-style regulation work without disrespecting people who are engaging in innocent entrepreneurial activity.” Wacquant asserts that the implication is that certain types of people will be cleansed from the street. In fact, as discussed above, in the book I demonstrate that even the lowly panhandler is at heart a certain kind of entrepreneur. If disorder were to be defined with greater accuracy, it would not result in a class cleansing,” but at policing strategies aimed at specific *behaviors*—such as overly aggressive panhandling—rather than *categories of people*.

But the book goes much further than merely to suggest more effective strategies for “managing” social disorder. Not only does it encourage a more “enlightened response” to the problems of urban space, advocating a “greater tolerance and respect for people working the sidewalks” (SW, p. 313), but it forcefully argues on many occasions for recognition of the more structural foundations of these conditions:

Learning to deal with it entails recognizing that the forces that bring about the entrepreneurial activities of the sidewalk help us to define what America has become for many poor people. The people who work on Sixth Avenue . . . have lived their lives in interaction with a variety of political, economic, and historical conditions, including housing segregation, spatially concentrated poverty, deindustrialization, and Jim Crow. The failed policies of drug reform, best seen in disparate penalties meted out for two different forms of the same drug—crack and power cocaine—is especially obvious on these particular sidewalks. As we have seen, a combination of the effects of drug use on a person’s life, repeated encounters with the criminal justice system on the part of those who use crack, and the loss of day labor and low wage jobs that addicts and alcoholics could once depend upon all have likely influenced these lives. Aggressive and intolerant reactions to the people on the sidewalk will have no effect on these larger conditions which

⁴ I thank Julia Wrigley for suggesting this point to me.

will continue to lead people to work on streets like Sixth Avenue. (SW, p. 314)

Sidewalk demonstrates the cruel structural conditions that have led to the sidewalk economy as an adaptation to the disappearance of welfare and work. But the adaptation is a tenuous one at best. The vendors exist under extreme space constraints, their position continually threatened by the business groups and politicians who seek their removal. And yet Wacquant appears to have missed my discussion of the vulnerability and constraints of sidewalk life, given his absurd claim that I see the sidewalk economy in scavenged written matter as the fix for the 60,000 ex-convicts who come streaming out of state prison in New York every year or that *Sidewalk* posits scavenging, vending, and panhandling as solutions to the problems of poverty in our cities, rather than as solutions of individuals who have been left to their own devices.

Wacquant accuses me of presenting a utopian vision of the sidewalk in which the survivors among the poor become models of neoliberal self-sufficiency. To the contrary, the vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers presented in the book have been—and continue to be—viewed by many as the scourge of society. These are the men who are the focus of police efforts to enforce “quality of life” ordinances; the target of the business improvement district’s efforts to “clean up the streets”; the remnants of a criminal justice system that has abandoned efforts toward rehabilitation; the product of a social service system that has been streamlined to the point of ineffectiveness. Only a reviewer of *Sidewalk* who constructed an unreliable hodgepodge of distorted quotations would imagine these men as propaganda for the neoliberal state; rather, they are casualties of the neoliberal state, whose tenuous existence is continually threatened by the political leaders and business groups who vehemently seek their removal.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

In the first two sections, I addressed the dominant claims of Wacquant’s critique. In the following section—within the limitations of space—I address several of Wacquant’s remaining claims.

Issues of Method

Wacquant.—“Instead of selecting a site to answer a sociological question, the 29-page methodological appendix . . . makes it clear that Duneier happened onto a site that, for whatever reasons, attracted him and in which he developed rich and rare contacts. So he went about ‘fishing’ for questions to which these informants might have answers. But his problematic did not emerge inductively, as in the epistemological fairy tale of ‘grounded theory’ or ‘diagnostic ethnography’: it resulted from the projection, onto the sidewalk, of Duneier’s personal interest in mo-

ality and 'respectability' (already evident in *Slim's Table* [1992])" (p. 1481).

Response.—My approach is not strictly inductive or deductive: I engage a variety of theoretical/sociological questions, some of which I brought to the site from the beginning, some of which I discovered through various routes as I worked in the site. Wacquant emphasizes that I "happened onto the site" rather than choosing the site among a range of possible sites on the grounds that it best serve the theoretical needs of my research program. With respect to the core issue of my agenda—understanding the ways in which moral behavior is and is not constructed within settings seemingly unfavorable to such behavior—subsistence among unhoused vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers was chosen because of its appropriateness to that ongoing theme. It is true that it was fortuitous that I happened to be living in close proximity to this particular group of people and that I just "happened" on to the site in this narrower sense; but I would not have selected it and devoted time to exploring it if it had not been suitable for this larger agenda. Wacquant describes this aspect of my relationship to the site as my "projection" onto the site of my "personal interest" (p. 1481). To be sure, this is a "personal interest," but it is also a sociological problem, since the question of moral/norm-based behavior figures so strongly within many strands of sociological theory. Wacquant misses that in one sense, every sociologist, when they bring questions to a site, "project" the *question* onto the site. The real question is whether or not they project their answers: Does the research allow for any learning from the site?

Wacquant.—"Diagnostic ethnography' is the label coined by Duneier's Wisconsin colleague Erik Wright to characterize this inductivist, I-began-to-get-ideas-from-the-things-I-was-seeing-and-hearing-on-the-street approach to field-based inquiry (SW, p. 341). The name is catchy and the analogy attractive but it is invalid: a therapist who 'gains an appreciation of the "symptoms" that characterize a "patient"' does not extract a medical theory out of clinical data; she anchors her observations in a nosography and a nosology backed up by an aetiology. And her primary task is to sift through information to select a *recipe* so to cure a condition, not discover the hidden *mechanisms* that produce it (indeed, the therapist typically knows that mechanism well, thanks to the science of medical biology)" (p. 1481, n. 19; his emphasis).

Response.—The idea of diagnostic ethnography is not that the ethnography extracts a theory out of clinical data. Rather, the idea is that the ethnographer comes to a site with the sociological equivalent of the doctor's medicine bag of diagnostic tools derived from already-existing sociological theory and uses these tools to generate a specific explanation for the "symptoms" in the site. This does involve identifying real mechanisms present in the specific case on the basis of preexisting theory. Note that Wacquant states "the therapist knows that mechanism well." This is true *only after the successful diagnosis*. Prior to the diagnosis all the doctor

knows is the range of possible mechanisms that could be present in the case, since many mechanisms can generate the same manifest symptoms experienced by the patient. The whole point of diagnosis is to differentiate among the possible mechanisms so that the “recipe” for a cure will work. In *Sidewalk*, I am sometimes engaging in a diagnostic task and sometimes engaging in theory reconstruction.

Wacquant.—“This appendix makes it clear that, for Duneier, there is no epistemological divide separating ethnography from journalism: these are kindred practices that employ the same techniques and obey similar canons, except that journalists are apparently more honest and more rigorous. ‘To use the tape recorder effectively, the sociologist can *mimic the photojournalist*. . . . One of the basic ideas of my method was *simply following my nose*, going to great lengths to check stuff out and make sure there is a warrant for believing what I’ve been told. Here I was *simply doing what any competent reporter was doing*, but something which ethnographers have not taken as seriously in their work’ [SW, pp. 340, 345]” (p. 1525, n. 66; his emphasis).

Response.—Wacquant earlier accuses me of never doubting what I am told, but here quotes me as “going to great lengths to check stuff out and make sure there is a warrant for believing what I’ve been told.” Why did Wacquant not quote from this section of my book when it was relevant to his earlier claim? He demonstrates a lack of willingness to disclose qualifications to a point he is making.

While I do, like a reporter, check out what I am told, and I do often use real names when my subjects agree to it, in fact I *do* see an important epistemological divide between sociology and journalism. The former is committed to interrogating folk concepts, while the latter generally employs them as a tool of analysis.

My ethnography also has other commitments that most journalists do not share: being public about procedures and clear about uncertainties, presenting alternative interpretations and counterevidence, considering rival hypotheses, striving to achieve replicability, seeking to be aware of investigator effects, and using fieldwork to modify and improve theory.

At the same time, methodologically *Sidewalk* is partly a response to certain deficiencies in the current practice of ethnography that I do not think have been taken as seriously as they should be. These include a lack of attention to what it means to have a reasonably reliable record of what is said, as evidenced by the lack of discussion in the methodological literature about the meaning of quotation marks. (This is quite problematic for a field that relies so significantly on verbal evidence.) It also includes a lack of attention to fact checking. I believe there are important epistemological differences between sociology and journalism, but that there is much that ethnographers can learn from the craft and discipline of journalism.

Wacquant.— In discussing my argument that “for the women, the men’s ‘eyes upon the street’ do not bring about a sense of security among strang-

ers but a feeling of deep distrust" (SW, pp. 199, 216), Wacquant says, "This would seem to be a textbook case of methodological overkill: does one need to track 'adjacency pairs,' spot 'disaffiliative responses,' measure the delay between question and answer with a stopwatch in tenths of a second, and resort to the intricate transcription techniques of conversation analysis to 'discover' that women use 'distracted facial gestures,' hurried moves, and curt replies to ward off unwanted invites to face-to-face exchange by male strangers in public space?" (p. 1475, n. 8).

Response.—In order to trivialize my method, Wacquant gives a highly inaccurate summary of the argument it supports. First, one could not employ conversation analysis (CA) to discover that women use distracted facial gestures. This would require a different method altogether. Second, the "discovery" that came from using the CA is not that women use "hurried moves" nor "curt replies," but to see "an important dimension of what is so unsettling about these interactions" (SW, p. 190). In addition to the content of what gets said, attention to the conversational detail showed an added layer of reasons that explained why some of the people felt a tension well out of proportion to any material or physical harm the interaction, according to my observation, might involve. (This is also documented in more detail in Duneier and Molotch [1999].)

We can be sorry if Wacquant finds a particular method of documentation too rigorous for his taste. Sociology is constantly criticized for documenting the "obvious" when, in fact, there is more than one obvious. More important, such documentation can show just how the "obvious" works. In this case, the exercise pinpoints just what "harassment" consists of: it is not necessarily about content (either physical threats or sexist language) but about process—ignoring certain procedures of "civility." This kind of trouble, one which removes the taken for granted grounds of everyday interaction, is fundamentally threatening in a way that insults might not be. It helps explain why otherwise liberal and well-meaning people would be so upset as to support public policies that harass, in turn, the men who speak to them in this way. Locating this pattern of "interactional vandalism" indeed required a precise methodology, however much it tries Wacquant's preference for a less exacting approach.

Law Enforcement

Wacquant.—"It must be noted first that Greenwich Village is an odd place to assess the workings of any law-enforcement strategy, since it is a diverse yet wealthy area. . . . The problems of public-order maintenance that arise in it are different from those faced by homogenous residential or commercial neighborhoods and even more so the ghettoized communities that bear the brunt of 'quality-of-life' policing" (p. 1482).

Response.—In much of ethnographic work, representativeness matters in a contingent way. The unrepresentativeness of Greenwich Village in demographic terms is irrelevant to my critique of "broken windows."

When I use ethnographic data to modify the broken windows theory, the data are much more general than the particularities of Greenwich Village. My data on the panhandlers, scavengers, and vendors of Sixth Avenue helped me see that the broken windows theory made untenable assumptions about the similarities between social and physical disorders. "It seems that an intellectual weakness of the 'broken windows' theory as it is applied to people on Sixth Avenue is that it is formulated as a claim about the people who *look at* the broken window, rather than also being a theory about the behavior of the person *who is* the broken window. In a theory that moves by analogy from physical to social disorder, this is not tenable" (SW, p. 288). This and other modifications to the broken windows theory in my book do not depend upon Greenwich Village being typical or representative of a population.

Wacquant.—"Duneier presents as fact the propaganda of the mayor's office and neoconservative ideologues of the 'war on crime,' according to which 'zero tolerance' has lowered crime in New York City (SW, pp. 287, 313) in spite of solid research findings to the contrary" (p. 1483).

Response.—Wacquant here twists references and ignores statements that contradict his argument. He does not tell the reader that I make the following statement: "Since 1993, crime rates have dropped dramatically in New York City. Because crime rates have also dropped in cities where the 'broken windows' theory has not been applied, the extent to which the dramatic drop in New York can be attributed to 'broken windows'—style social control is a matter of fierce debate" (SW, p. 158). This is not the mayor's propaganda. I am personally sympathetic to multiple possible causes.

Wacquant.—"One must ask: Why should homeless sidewalk vendors have to *reduce* crime rather than simply *abstain* from it in order to . . . exercise their trade?" (p. 1484).

Response.—In fact, *Sidewalk* never makes this claim, and indeed the whole thrust of the book is that the struggle for a decent day, a shred of dignity, is a justification in itself for being left in peace and treated in a humane way.

Homelessness

Wacquant.—"Students of homelessness—and, even more so, advocates for the rights of the homeless—will be surprised to learn that being 'unhoused' (a curious neologism used throughout the book by Duneier) is a voluntary phenomenon: vendors and scavengers 'choose' to sleep on the streets either because of the brute habituation of their body to 'sleeping on hard surfaces' or as an expression of their abiding commitment to entrepreneurialism" (p. 1474).

Response.—Wacquant may think that that "students of homelessness" would read my argument as he does, but they read it in a much more nuanced way. For example, reviewing *Sidewalk* in *Social Service Review*,

Kim Hopper, one the nation's leading experts on homelessness in the field of social work, summarized what I wrote as follows:

So are these the fabled objects of conservative ire, men whose homelessness is perversely "self-imposed"? Not exactly: there is a logic to their sleeping rough. Duneier shows us that seemingly perverse behavior is embedded action, a choice both situated and historically conditioned. Like his mentor, Howard Becker . . . before him, he is concerned with biographical inertia—the cumulative thrust of past choices and the narrowed field of possibility that creates—as well as the limits and pressures of present-day circumstance. So what is described as "choice" gets complicated. On the one hand, it means reconciling oneself to necessity and taking responsibility for the consequence of one's actions; on the other, the men's insistence that they are "authors of their own lives" ([SW] p. 121) recalls E. Wright Bakke's Depression-era finding that blaming oneself is the last refuge of self-respect among the unemployed. . . . They may be "retreatists" ([SW] p. 364) . . . but their choice is an existential act and a face saving assertion. (Hopper 2001, p. 175)

And, on the question of my use of the word "unhoused," Hopper states:

Duneier studiously avoids the term *homeless*, for example, in describing the men and women who ply their trade at Sixth and Greenwich Avenues, even though he is quite explicit that some of them are 'unhoused.' This is more than a stylistic cavil. He means to nudge us first to recall all that the term home connotes and then to notice how much of that symbolic freight and practical support is actually accomplished through other, less spatially concentrated means in this setting. But his choice of words is also an act of regard, a gesture that honors the defining activity ("I'm a vendor")—and not the correlative condition (who is also homeless)—of these men's identities. In this gesture a point about method and fidelity is also expressed. (Hopper 2001, p. 174)

"The Moral Salience and Cultural Sponsorship Thesis"

Wacquant.— "Duneier presents no evidence that Hakim and his colleagues actually have any influence over young men from the ghetto who take advice and purchase books from them, unless one counts as evidence the incidental statement to that effect of *one* youth during a quick interview on the fly" (p. 1476; his emphasis).

Response.—I do not argue that the vendors have a sociomoral efficacy in the lives of young black men from the ghetto who are pedestrians in Greenwich Village, just that Hakim does. His effect is part of the multiplicity of competing forces. The evidence I present for Hakim's influence comes not only from the hundreds of encounters I report witnessing (SW, p. 25), but is also illustrated through the transcripts of conversations that

I offer as an example of these relationships, as well as interviews with Hakim and the young man in those very transcripts (SW, pp. 25–36).

Wacquant.—“Duneier also speculates that the vendor’s table is ‘a site for interaction that weakens the social barriers between persons otherwise separated by vast social and economic inequalities’ (SW, p. 71) but he presents no data and suggests no mechanism whereby such fleeting and superficial contacts would produce this weakening” (p. 1476).

Response.—Wacquant’s claim is inaccurate. The section “Relations with Customers” (SW, pp. 69–74) presents the transcript of a conversation between two vendors, Marvin and Ron, and Jack, an upper-middle-class New Yorker who regularly comes to the table to buy used catalogs from Christie’s auction house. I also present data from an interview with Jack about his relationship with the vendors and data from my interview with the vendors about their relationship with Jack. It is erroneous to call their contacts “fleeting and superficial.” I demonstrate that these contacts develop over time and are hardly superficial. As Jack told me, “I kind of miss Marvin and Ron sometimes. When I’m in my apartment [three blocks away], I’ll say, ‘Let’s have a break.’ So I go out and see my magazine men” (SW, p. 71).

Wacquant.—“As for the notion that ‘there is no substitute for the power of the informal social relations that constitute a wholesome sidewalk’ (SW, p. 42), it is simply fanciful: cities and neighborhoods without sidewalk vendors have not for that reason plunged into moral strife and social chaos” (p. 1476).

Response.—Wacquant trivializes and misrepresents an important argument by taking it completely out of context. I am certainly not arguing that cities require street vendors to be healthy. I wrote, “[Hakim] knows that sidewalk contacts of the kind depicted here cannot substitute for the larger transformations and rebuilding of family, institutions, and neighborhoods. But just as there is no substitute for wholesome institutional structures, so there is no substitute for the power of informal social relations that constitute a wholesome sidewalk life and society. Indeed, it is important to recognize the importance of the informal activity of public characters like Hakim” (SW, pp. 41–42). Wacquant substitutes “street vendors” for “informal social relations” and thus deprives my formulation of common sense.

Wacquant.—“[Duneier] offers a profusion of dispersed notations, vignettes, and slices but not the kind of systematic life histories needed to connect the local world of the vendors to the major institutions that coprocess them: the deregulated labor market, the criminal justice system, health and welfare bureaucracies, charitable organizations, and personal networks beyond the street scene. Such biographical-cum-institutional data would reveal the pathways in and out of that world and allow the reader to see whether and under what conditions sidewalk commerce exercises its alleged salvaging virtues on homeless vendors, rather than sustaining their addictions, entrenching their marginality, and perpetu-

ating their misery. Instead of linking the trajectories of vendors to the transformation of extant social structures, Duneier insists that it is 'difficult to rigorously project individual cases onto the template of social processes' so that all we can do is 'speculate with caution' (SW, p. 51)" (p. 1480).

Response.—Wacquant has severed my statement from its context. When I speak of "speculating with caution," I do so not by discussing a folk theory of role models, but in referring to the fact that it is difficult to assess one vendor's claim that he entered the informal economy due to his inability to find work in the formal economy, or another vendor's claim that he became a vendor due to the destiny ordained by his use of crack. In fact, my caution here is in line with my insistence on not romanticizing the subjects or their stories or accepting at face value what they say. Wacquant tells the reader nothing whatsoever about an entire section of my methodological appendix, which deals with the complications of projecting the individual cases of our subjects onto the template of social processes (SW, pp. 333–34). What I write here marks a major difference between Wacquant and me in the way we theorize our materials. Thinking of fieldworkers like Wacquant, I wrote in my appendix,

A common way for a fieldworker to [deal with structural issues] is to suggest that economic or political forces all but guarantee that a particular person will act in a certain way. Such analysts . . . invoke determinism rather than tendencies, dispositions, and constraints. . . . The ethnographer who allows theory to dominate data and who twists perception to cover the facts makes a farce out of otherwise careful work. There is a middle ground: to try to grasp the connections between individual lives and the macro-forces at every turn, while acknowledging one's uncertainty when one cannot be sure how those forces come to bear on individual lives. That I think, is the best a committed scholar can do, and I hope my own uncertainty rings out loud and clear when appropriate in these pages. (SW, pp. 333–34)

For an alternative approach, I recommend that readers study one of Wacquant's (1989) attempts at ethnography in "Inside the Zone: The Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto."

Wacquant.—"60,000 ex-convicts . . . flood out of state prisons every year in New York State, three-fourths of whom come from and return to the seven poorest neighborhoods in New York City. How many of them can realistically hope to find a place to peddle used magazines when vending spots are already overloaded, and how many can expect to earn enough that way to pay rent and move off the street when even full-time workers at low-wage jobs cannot?" (p. 1485).

Response.—It is absurd to claim that *Sidewalk* presents the sale of written matter as a general solution to the problems of joblessness among ex-offenders. We know from other research that men coming out of jail and prison have significantly lower rates of employment than their non-incarcerated peers (Western and Beckett 1999) and that the "mark of a

criminal record” represents a substantial liability in securing legitimate employment (Pager 2002). Will sidewalk vending solve these problems? Of course not.

Sidewalk vending is only one strategy used for economic survival. Millions of people supplement their income with earnings from the informal economy (see, e.g., Edin and Lein 1997). Efforts by business improvement districts and city governments to rid the streets of these grey market activities would have a devastating impact on the lives of many, including ex-offenders. While the sale of used books and magazines represents only one such activity, the larger constellation of employment within the informal economy may very well provide an important buffer for the hundreds of thousands leaving prison each year; people who face serious barriers to finding work in the formal economy.

CONCLUSION

Wacquant’s essay is written with such conviction that by its end it may have the feel of a complete and penetrating analysis—even to a reader who sees that its appraisal is one-sided. Its flaws may merely seem those of a partial, tendentious reading of *Sidewalk*, and for that matter *Code of the Street* and *No Shame in My Game*. However Wacquant’s piece is not merely one-sided. In its obvious omissions and misrepresentations, it fails to meet minimal standards of scholarly criticism and debate. It is not akin to combat in a sport with rules, like boxing, but to a free-for-all in the schoolyard. Even by the standards of vigorous scholarly polemic better known in France than in the United States, it is a surprising act.⁵

The sheer volume, character, and style of Wacquant’s mistakes is disappointing, especially coming from an ethnographer who writes about people and places that are either completely anonymous or have disappeared by the time he publishes his work. If he does not quote or characterize reliably in a scholarly review, when the text under consideration is available for others to check against, how can we be expected to have faith in representations that come from the gym depicted in his ethnography of boxers, *Body and Soul* (Wacquant 2004), which no longer exists?

In writing his review, Wacquant had the luxury of a great deal of space, and this had the effect of getting all of his criticisms on the table for open discussion. He gave it his best shot, and this muddle is what resulted: a flawed argument supported by selective quotation and misrepresentation. It would be a shame to conclude from this instance that hard-hitting critique that raises political issues has no place in our discipline. I have always admired C. Wright Mills (1959) and contemporary sociologists like Stephen Steinberg (1995), whose work demonstrates the importance of

⁵ This is not the first time these complaints have been made about Wacquant’s scholarship. See, e.g., French (2000), Wieviorka (2000).

meticulous and impassioned criticism that challenges main currents of the field.

As (urban) ethnographers, we walk a line, many lines: romanticizing versus condemning; bringing theoretical questions to the field versus discovering them while working at the site; protecting anonymity versus replication and/or accountability; political agendas versus naïve tabula rasa; fully theorized versus open to issues and empirical events; redistributing ethnographic authority versus maintaining the authority of the social scientist; seeing agency/resistance versus all determining structures; accumulating many thinner observations versus a few thick ones; using an in-depth description to enter into a dialogue with a theory versus telling readers only as much about people and places as they need to know to reconstruct a theory.

These are real dilemmas that become embodied as practical trade-offs and enduring tensions in the descriptions and arguments of ethnographies. One apparent contrast between my stance and Wacquant's is my embrace of these dilemmas—my belief that ethnographic work must make trade-offs, and that there is no single, universal “best way” of balancing these choices. Wacquant, in contrast, writes as if there is a best way of doing so, although he has not explained (or demonstrated) how he arrived at this conclusion.

Real research means making choices, often difficult ones to yield nuance instead of slogans. Real critique means judging those trade-offs and hard choices in terms of the project results—not naively charging in with a single-minded jab that meets up with nothing. In the manner of his response Wacquant does little to advance either careful reading of others' work or ways to make our work better.

A major thrust of my work has been to reveal the common elements of humanity. Most people have common bases of life, and many people who are presumed to be quite different have some salient “moral” characteristics in common. The sociological task is to disentangle what is common and what is distinctive and to account for those distinctions in light of history, situation, and structure. I hope that the vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers in *Sidewalk* will come across as having more in common with the reader than he or she had thought before reading the book. I do not argue that they are “the same as” middle-class readers. On the whole, I adhere to a “there but for fortune go I” view of the world in which “there but” counts for a great deal and the analyst's job is to specify just what the “there but” consists of.⁶

In the present period of U.S. history there has been a strong current of ideological and cultural dehumanization of marginalized social groups. It is *especially* important in such circumstances to study empirically and account systematically for the differences and, when accurate, to reaffirm elements of commonality.

⁶ I thank Harvey Molotch for suggesting this point.

Sidewalk does not depict the vendors as saints, but rather brings to light their basic humanity, and yes, the desperate attempt of many, against nearly insuperable odds, to live “moral” lives. To say this does not mean, as Wacquant alleges, that I think poor people in general can or should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. I am not propounding a general theory of poverty, or how it can be remediated, by observing how these poor people strived to keep their heads above water, even as the state, with its policies on welfare, its prohibitions against scavenging and vending, and so forth, yanks away the life preserver that they reach for.

The capacity of urban ethnography to humanize its subjects is one of its greatest strengths, providing an important antidote to the opposite tendencies among theorists of both the right and left who depict such people only in abstract terms, devoid of their quintessentially human qualities. This occurs most notably in work that portrays the victims of racial and class oppression as downtrodden, pathetic creatures who are psychologically defeated. I do hope that through the complex portraits of the vendors, panhandlers, and scavengers in *Sidewalk*, readers will come to appreciate the basic humanity of these pariahs who are so often dehumanized.

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